

Equality, diversity and inclusion within the counselling professions

Good Practice in Action 062
Commonly Asked Questions

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Context

This resource is one of a suite prepared by BACP to enable members to engage with the current BACP *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* in respect of equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI).

Using Commonly Asked Questions resources

BACP members have a contractual commitment to work in accordance with the current *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions*. The Commonly Asked Questions resources are not contractually binding on members, but are intended to support practitioners by providing general information on principles and policy applicable at the time of publication, in the context of the core ethical principles, values and personal moral qualities of BACP.

Specific issues in practice will vary depending on clients, particular models of working, the context of the work and the kind of therapeutic intervention provided. As specific issues arising from work with clients are often complex, BACP always recommends discussion of practice dilemmas with a supervisor and/or consulting a suitably qualified and experienced legal or other relevant practitioner. In this resource, the word 'therapist' is used to mean specifically counsellors and psychotherapists and 'therapy' to mean specifically counselling and psychotherapy.

The terms 'practitioner' and 'counselling related services' are used generically in a wider sense, to include the practice of counselling, psychotherapy, coaching and pastoral care.

1 Who is this resource for and what does it aim to do?

This is one of a series of resources for practitioners, supervisors, trainers, or researchers who want to know more about equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI).

This resource highlights questions BACP members have raised as being common during their therapeutic work in respect of equality, diversity and inclusion.

The aim of this resource is to provide a basic introduction to some of the issues connected to EDI. People using this resource are encouraged to see it as a springboard for their own further study. There are links to resources which can provide more in-depth information or training opportunities. It is always recommended that practitioners who have questions relating to EDI should consult a supervisor or other appropriate professional.

2 What is EDI and why is it important in therapy?

Equality, diversity and inclusion cover all aspects of relationships where differences can lead to barriers to access, or to other disadvantages.

An awareness of diversity issues in counselling is important to ensure we are abiding by the principle of 'Justice', which is a core aspect of BACP's *Ethical Framework*. We also have some legal obligations under the Equality Act (Equality Act, 2010) (see below). As practitioners, we need to have knowledge of these legal requirements to ensure that we are working within the law.

Moreover, challenges to EDI affect our clients' lives and experiences in very real ways, and need to be accounted for in the support we provide for them. The set of BACP resources relating to equality, diversity and inclusion will help readers understand some of the difficulties faced by people accessing therapy, and suggest some ways to create a safe therapeutic environment for everyone, so that no one is prevented from receiving support because of their differences.

3 What does the Equality Act say about how we should approach EDI as practitioners?

The Equality Act 2010 identifies nine protected characteristics. The EDI resources explore each of these characteristics, and how they might manifest themselves in therapeutic settings:

- Age
- Disability
- Gender reassignment
- Marriage and civil partnership
- Pregnancy and maternity
- Race
- Religion and belief
- Sex
- Sexual orientation.

Some of these protected characteristics, such as age, or sexual orientation are relevant to all of us. In respect of these characteristics, whilst some identities are more often prone to marginalisation by society, the Equality Act 2010 does not apply to any particular identity or orientation within a protected characteristic over any other.

People with any of the protected characteristics are protected not only as employees, but also as service users. We cannot either directly or indirectly discriminate against someone on the grounds of any of the protected characteristics in respect of who we work with, or who we employ. If the person has a disability, we may be required to make reasonable adjustments such that they can access services or work. See Good Practice in Action 080 Commonly Asked Questions (BACP 2018) on reasonable adjustments for more information about this. Discrimination can be direct or indirect. Both of them have the result of treating someone less favourably, due to a protected characteristic, than you would treat others.

The Equality Act also prohibits:

- Harassment (i.e. engaging in unwanted conduct towards another person) because of that person's age, disability, gender reassignment, race, religion or belief, sex or sexual orientation; and
 - bring proceedings under this Act
 - give evidence or information in connection with proceedings under this Act or
 - do any other thing for the purposes of or in connection with this Act
 - making an allegation (whether or not express) that A or another person has contravened this Act.

It is important to remember that the law sets out the minimum standard of access and equality. We are committed by BACP's *Ethical Framework* to respect our clients and to: '*take the law concerning equality, diversity and inclusion into careful consideration and strive for a higher standard than the legal minimum*'. (Good Practice, point 23) (BACP 2018)

It is also important to remember that it is not only the differences that are protected by law which can create disadvantage. Of the many other factors that can cause barriers to access, some examples include:

- education, employment or socio-economic status
- gender identity (as defined by the individual, and not covered by the protected characteristic of 'gender re-assignment')
- immigration status
- experiences like abuse or addiction
- mental or physical health issues not covered by the law
- language and communication barriers not covered by the protected characteristic of 'disability'.

If you work in an organisation, you will need to familiarise yourself with your organisation's equality and diversity policies in addition to the legislation and this guide.

4 How can I start to become more inclusive as a practitioner?

As therapists, we need to be alert to anything that can affect the power balance with our clients, including any kind of difference that could place us in a position of privilege, or disadvantage our clients. The idea is not to do away with power imbalances in therapy, as this may not be fully possible, but to ensure we are aware of them and minimise their negative impact on the therapeutic relationship.

BACP has produced several resources, which explore different aspects of EDI in more detail. A list can be found at the end of this resource.

More detail is included in each of the EDI resources, but a good starting place is the 'four As' of inclusive practice:

- **Awareness:** Be aware that we all have differences, but some of those differences can lead to barriers and oppression. Make sure that you are educated about the historical, social and cultural aspects of different characteristics, including the discrimination and oppression that people are likely to have experienced. Do not wait for your client to educate you about their characteristics or differences. Inform yourself through CPD and individual learning, at the same time as being aware that each client's experience and perspective are unique.
- **Assumptions:** It is only by recognising that we all carry assumptions and prejudices that we can start to challenge them and be genuinely inclusive. Whether or not we have protected characteristics ourselves, we are likely to have spent most of our lives in environments which foster prejudice towards anyone perceived as 'different'. The EDI resources are a good starting point to help recognise in ourselves any damaging beliefs or assumptions that we may need to challenge.
- **Allyship:** For those who do not identify as having a particular characteristic, being an ally for an individual or a community that does, is a vital part of fostering inclusivity. Taking on the role of an ally does not always mean actively campaigning on behalf of a group of people. It can also mean creating and communicating a safe and accepting space where they know they can be themselves and be heard and understood. While this is an important part of forming any therapeutic relationship, be mindful that this has a particular value and meaning for clients who belong to groups that have historically faced discrimination or exclusion at societal level.
- **Ask:** Each person is a unique individual whose needs might be different from someone else who identifies as belonging to the same group. Even if you share the same characteristics, your experience of them might be quite different. While some knowledge of their community is helpful, it is important to be attentive to their individual experience and needs.

The practitioner's rights

While we mostly think of BACP's *Ethical Framework* in relation to our duty to our clients, it's important to acknowledge that as an individual practitioner, you may be on the receiving end of issues related to equality and discrimination. This may be with regards to a protected characteristic, or any of the other factors listed above that create barriers for people. The challenge may come from a client's behaviour towards you, or if you work in a team, from your colleague(s) or manager(s). Your psychological safety and freedom from discrimination are vital prerequisites for you to practise ethically, safely and be of service to others. Seek supervision and guidance at the earliest opportunity if such a situation arises.

About the author

Nikki Dhillon Keane is fluent in British Sign Language and has worked as a therapist with the Deaf community for 20 years. She also works in private practice with hearing clients. She specialises in working with diverse spiritualities and cultures, and has set up several projects working with different religious and cultural groups and with the Deaf community. She gives training to therapists and religious groups on disability and Deaf awareness, working with diversity, and working with survivors of abuse from different backgrounds. She is the author of *Domestic abuse in Church Communities* (www.rpbooks.co.uk) and co-founder of the Faith and VAWG Coalition, raising awareness of work at the intersection of faith and violence against women and girls.

Further resources

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) (2016) Good Practice in Action 056 Research Overview: *Equality, diversity and inclusion within the counselling professions* (Content Ed. Davies, N.). Lutterworth: BACP. Available at www.bacp.co.uk/media/5890/bacp-equality-diversity-inclusion-research-overview-gpia056-mar19.pdf [accessed 5 June 2020]

BACP (2016) Good Practice in Action 063 Clinical Reflections for Practice: *Equality, diversity and inclusion within the counselling professions* (Content Ed. Rattray, S.). Lutterworth: BACP. Available at www.bacp.co.uk/media/5533/bacp-equality-diversity-inclusion-within-counselling-professions-clinical-reflections-gpia063-feb19.pdf [accessed 5 June 2020]

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Equality Act 2010 c.15 Available at: www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents [accessed 1 June 2020].